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Opening extract from **Lifegame**

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Chapter 1

The baby was brought to the Orphanage straight from the car accident that killed his mother. It was 3 a.m. Dead of night in the dead of the winter of the year 112.

Papa Louis winced as his bare feet met the floor tiles. Many times, over the years, the night bell had woken him like this. As Director of the Orphanage he could have left one of his staff to deal with the night arrivals, but that wasn't the way he liked to run things. At Orphanage 206 each new child was welcomed by Papa Louis himself. If welcome was the right word, given the circumstances.

Outside on the icy pavement a lone Officiate Guard, illuminated by the street lamp, was holding the child. Papa Louis took in the spots of blood on the infant's shawl but his glance was tugged immediately to meet the fierce gaze of large, almost-black eyes. The baby could be no more than two months old, but those eyes locked on to Papa Louis, took hold of him, thrusting out their unique challenge upon the world. I'm watching you, they seemed to say. So you'd better not foul up.

Papa Louis took the child and tucked him into the shelter of his arm. He could feel the force of the silent gaze as sure as if it were a beam of heat. The child was still in shock. The silence wouldn't last. Papa Louis knew this from long experience. He turned towards the office. The sooner they could get the official data done, the sooner this lanky, pale-faced Guard would leave and he could concentrate on the child.

'No living relatives,' said the Guard. 'We'll clear out her stuff in the morning.'

He meant that they'd go to the home of the dead woman and dispose of everything. And because there were no living relatives, all the goods would be sold and the proceeds given to the Island State, which would now raise the child. End of story.

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'She was killed outright,' he added.

'And the baby is unharmed?' said Papa Louis.

'He was lucky.'

Papa Louis's questioning glance brushed the Guard's eye just long enough to find the usual insolent glare in return. There were many questions he could have asked but there was no point. You never got answers by asking questions, not on this Island. If the Officiate wanted you to know about something, then you'd be told. Otherwise not.

Papa Louis set the baby down carefully in a basket by his desk. As he straightened himself he saw the child's eyes still on him, watching.

He turned to the Guard.

'ID card?' he asked.

'No.'

Papa Louis didn't understand.

'But there must be! Everyone has . . . '

'What's it matter?' said the Guard. 'There's no one to take the kid in, no family left, so it doesn't matter who she was, does it?'

For the first time, Papa Louis noticed something beneath the usual arrogant Officiate manner. And it wasn't just that the Guard was in a hurry to dump the baby and get home. He was desperate to leave.

'How do you know there's no family, if there's no ID?' asked Papa Louis. After all, he didn't like being taken for a complete idiot.

The Guard glanced nervously at the ceiling.

'It's all right,' said Papa Louis, 'the cars are broken.'

The Guard was only a boy, really. Maybe no more than seventeen. Papa Louis smiled, hoping to encourage him. But it was no good: He was frightened.

'Look,' said the Guard, 'forget the ID. He's lucky enough I got him here, all right?'

Papa Louis shivered, and not because of the early morning chill that clung to the drab little office. No, he'd caught the shiver of fear from the Guard. Did the Officiate have a particular interest in this death?

'When you rang the night bell, you said a car crash,' said Papa Louis. 'Is that right?'

The Guard hesitated. Papa Louis waited, sensing that the boy could give him more if he didn't push too hard.

'She'd . . . run off the road. She'd been . . . '

'She'd been what?' asked Papa Louis gently. Was this boy

struggling with his conscience? It looked like it. Maybe even Officiate Guards had a conscience.

'I was the first one there, all right?' said the Guard, twitching a defensive glance at him. 'I saw the baby on the back seat. I got him out and took him to my car.'

'And the mother?'

Now the Guard looked straight at Papa Louis.

'There was a hole in the windscreen . . . '

'She'd been shot?'

The Guard shrugged and threw another nervous glance at the ceiling. 'Then some Senior Officiate turned up and they ordered me away.'

Papa Louis could see that the boy was shaking now. He reached out a hand to his shoulder. He felt shaky himself.

'Did they see the baby?' he asked.

The Guard shook his head.

'You did the right thing,' said Papa Louis. 'But the mother . . . '

The Guard turned to leave. As he reached the door, he said, 'The car's number. It was 734719.'

Papa Louis swung round to the desk and keyed the number into his notepad. When he turned back to thank him, the Guard was gone.

Papa Louis puffed out a long sigh and stared at the child, who was probing the space around him with huge, confused eyes.

'Sorry, fella, no way of knowing your name at the moment. So until I know, we'll call you Fella, how's that?' He bent towards the basket and the baby's eyes found him and

locked on to him again. He bounced his arms against the air. And then he started to cry.

Papa Louis lifted him and snuggled him into the crook of his elbow. But this did nothing to soothe him. It made him wriggle and scream, his face scrunched and red.

It was then that he felt something odd about the shape of the child. Something hard, unbending, at the base of his spine. He sat and laid him gently face down over his knees. Fella began to scream. Papa Louis worked quickly, trying to free the child from whatever it was that was hurting him. He pulled at the nappy and saw a plastic bag stuffed into it. He glanced round to check he was alone and then pulled out the bag and opened it.

The moment he saw what was inside, his heart started to pound painfully. A paperbook. Very small, but unmistakably a paperbook. Why hide it in such a place? The mother must have done it. But *why* would she have it? You hardly ever saw a paperbook. Only if it was an instruction manual for a computer or housechore device, and this was neither of these.

This was a completely different kind of thing. No pictures, diagrams, or figures. Just words, words, words. And not ordinary words. It was even hard to be sure that it was Island language, because it was in the old-fashioned style. It was done with a pen held in the hand; yes, it must be! Papa Louis stared at it in astonishment. It was a long, long time since he had seen pen-writing. The words were so densely packed, the shapes of the letters so unfamiliar. He shivered again, so suddenly that the paperbook snapped shut in his hands.

It was this way of writing, with a pen held in the hand, that they used to use in the Downzone in the Time Before. Could it possibly be that Fella's mother had written it? No, it wasn't possible. Perhaps she had found the paperbook and hidden it. But why? You wouldn't hide something like this without reason and you would have no reason unless you could read it. But in Papa Louis's lifetime and even before that, no one had ever been taught to read or write pen-writing on this Island.

The child had fallen quiet. As if he knew that this was a moment on which his whole life turned.

The silence deepened. Papa Louis could hear the white noise in his own head and the fearful pulsing of blood at his temples. He could feel the gentle thud of Fella's tiny heart against his knees and the warmth of this strange little paperbook as he turned it over and over in his hands.

He knew he should hand it in to the Officiate.

Instead, with shaking hands, he locked it in the safe.

And then, that first night of his life with Fella, Papa Louis left the child with Annie, the kindest of the women who worked at the Orphanage. She bathed him and changed his nappy. She tried to feed him. She cuddled and rocked him, but he wouldn't stop crying. Officiate rules said that children were to be drugged if they cried too much, but Papa Louis had never allowed that.

So, while Annie rocked, Papa Louis set out to try and find the other thing that sometimes worked. At least, that's what he told himself he was doing at the time. But really, he went because he was curious. That was what drove him to look

up the address where the car was registered. To seek out the place where Fella and his mother had lived.

He took the little van and headed off between the rows of dark tower blocks that surrounded the Orphanage. The dead woman's home, in Blue Boulevard, was in one of the B-grade areas on the other side of town. He found the place after about half an hour of driving round the Boulevards, along rows of identical four-bed detached villas which were as bleak, in their way, as the dark towers of his own E-grade zone. His luck was in. Even though the sun wasn't up yet, there was a light on in one of the neighbouring houses. A woman in a primrose-coloured housecoat opened the door, frowning, shivering in the grey morning.

'Never met her, only seen her once or twice,' she said when asked about the woman next door. She looked suspicious. Papa Louis showed his ID.

'She's dead,' he explained. 'Killed in a car crash. She had a child . . .'

'Nothing to do with us,' said the woman.

Papa Louis looked at her hard little face. Useless to explain what he was after. She was already pushing the door closed.

Well, Louis old pal, he thought, as the door clicked shut in his face, you're just going to have to risk it.

So he went round to the back of the house and broke in. It wasn't hard. He didn't actually have to break anything and there was no alarm system. There was a tiny window open and he managed to get his arm through and open the larger casement below it. He paused to get his breath. He was

getting a bit fragile for this sort of thing and it took a few minutes to get his stiff old legs folded up and through the window. At last he was sitting on the draining board.

He never felt good about resorting to this. But it was necessary. The Officiate understood nothing about children who'd lost their parents. They'd 'dispose' of the whole household, having neither the imagination to think nor the heart to care that a child in distress could suck a tiny breath of comfort from the last, lingering scent of its mother. So sometimes he, Papa Louis, Director of Orphanage 206, became a raider of dead people's linen.

There was nothing much to dispose of in this house. As he glanced into each sparsely furnished room looking for some clue as to who or what this woman had been, he saw nothing beyond the usual household equipment. Upstairs he found a nightdress in the bed. He took the pillowcases off the pillows and stuffed one inside the other, along with the nightdress. That should be enough.

He cast a glance around the bare room, which was now being washed by the first light of low winter sun. Suddenly, he could feel the dark gaze of the baby he had left at the Orphanage.

Papa Louis will try to take care of your child, he told the rumped, empty bed. He'll do his best.

He had just decided to have a more thorough search of the place, when a movement on the edge of his vision made him glance out of the window at the Boulevard below. A large black car had turned into the end of the road and was climbing the hill towards the house.

Papa Louis ran back down the stairs and out through the back door. The garden was completely enclosed at the back by a high fence. He turned down the side alleyway, his only way back to the van. Too late. The car, a luxury Officiate vehicle, had stopped outside the house.

He hunkered down behind the waste bins in the alleyway, his heart racing. An armed guard got out of the front of the car and opened the rear door for a man to emerge. This man was not in uniform. But he must be far, far higher rank than the armed thugs who were driving him.

Papa Louis shrank back as the men approached the house. He heard the splintering of the door as it was broken down.

He waited a few moments more, and then, on shaking legs, hurried down the drive and back to the van.

Lucky that part of the Boulevard was on a steep slope. Lucky he could take the brake off and let the van roll silently away out of sight. Because the very last thing he wanted at that moment was to be heard or seen.

Chapter 2

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There was something wrong with Papa Louis. Fella knew it. No matter how hard he tried to push this knowing away, it was no good. Once you know something, you know it.

You could see it in the way Papa Louis had slowed down. The way, when he lifted a baby from its cot, it would take him longer, cost him some pain, to straighten up. It was a movement Fella was so used to, perhaps the most typical of his movements, sweeping a child into his arms, that it was easy to see the change. And the change in colour. His skin was slowly fading to yellowish-grey.

Fella blinked at the tears that were blurring the tower blocks ahead of him. He wiped the back of his hand across his eyes but more tears came, and more.

He could not imagine a world without Papa Louis in it.

Some of the women at the Orphanage weren't so bad. They did their best to be nice to the kids, but it was Papa Louis who stood between them and the Officiate. Everyone knew that they were luckier here than in most State

Orphanages. They were never drugged, for one thing. Just as well, because if anyone ever tried to drug *him* they'd end up in a pretty drowsy state themselves.

Fella swung his leg back and took a vicious kick at a beer can lying on the pavement, sending it clattering along the hot, cracked concrete.

'Hey!' A voice called out behind him.

Great! Now he'd be reported for littering or uncalm behaviour. He turned. No, not some smug little Officiate informer. It was Grebe. He just had time to wipe his eyes again without it being too obvious. Then she was next to him, grinning.

But in a heartbeat the grin had gone and her eyes had widened in alarm.

'Fella? What's wrong?'

He never had been able to hide anything from Grebe. His oldest, his best friend. Still, he didn't want this intrusion. The way he felt about Papa Louis was the most private thing in his life. Probably the only private thing in his life. He couldn't explain it, even to Grebe. He shrugged and quickened his pace. Papa Louis would be waiting for him down by the river.

She walked with him in a silence that was like a silk scarf wrapped around a rock. Fella knew that she was considering whether to try another angle to the question. No question came, and he was glad. It seemed she'd decided just to walk beside him for a while. There was something about the way she had to take extra-long paces to keep up that made him smile inside, despite his misery.

'Guess what?' she said.

This made him smile outright, took him straight back to those stupid childhood games they used to play, where they would boast to each other about imaginary things they'd done, or they would pretend that they weren't really who they were but someone else with a much more exciting life. Except sometimes these games had upset Fella because he didn't even know who he was to begin with.

'Go on. Guess what?' She nudged her shoulder against his arm.

'What?'

'My father has bought my mother a new speedcar. Because it's my birthday soon.'

'Kind of him. What's he bought you?'

'Don't know. But anyway, listen. The speedcar is the wrong colour. My mother says it won't go with any of her jewellery.'

'No!' Fella slapped a hand to his forehead in horror. 'Whatever is she going to do?'

'Don't know. The trauma is so severe she's taken to her bed. She may never recover.'

Fella grinned down at her.

'Is that true?'

'No. She hasn't taken to her bed. But they did have a very noisy row about it.'

Grebe's parents were B-grade, so they could afford to buy almost anything they wanted but they weren't allowed the travel perks of the A-graders. It was this, Fella assumed, that caused Grebe's mother to have regular tantrums. Over the years, listening to Grebe's stories about her parents had

sometimes made Fella grateful to be an orphan. Except, not really. Because *his* parents wouldn't have been like Grebe's, would they?

The thing about being an orphan was that you could create parents in your own imagination—and over the years Fella's creations had been many and elaborate. They'd had to be. He didn't even have a letter, which all the other Orphanage kids did. The letter would arrive, as soon as your information had been processed, to tell you why you're in a State Orphanage. Your parent/parents was/were killed/died on a certain date. The Island State would now accommodate all your needs. But he'd never had a letter.

There'd been a car crash, that's all he knew. Many times he had questioned Papa Louis and sometimes he'd thought he'd seen something in the old man's eyes. Something like hesitation or pain. But Papa Louis had always said no, he knew nothing about who Fella's parents were. And Fella had always believed him.

'So, anyway, this stupid birthday . . . ' said Grebe.

'It's not so stupid. As soon as you're sixteen you can leave the Attainment Centre.'

Grebe shot him a sad look. No need to say it. The Attainment Centre was a nightmare but what came next would probably be worse.

'I don't think they'll give me B-grade work,' said Grebe, 'I'm not clever enough. It'll be C if I'm lucky.'

Fella reached down and laced his fingers through hers, stroking his thumb across the fine bones of her hand. Tiny, fragile hand. Like a bat's wing.

'What would you like for your birthday?' he said. 'Any present you want.' He flung out his free arm with a flourish. 'You choose.'

'Yeah, well. That's what we all want, isn't it?' she said. 'To choose.'

She squeezed his hand and they fell silent for a while.

'So anyway, this stupid birthday,' she said again. 'My parents are hiring the Dome at the end of our Boulevard. All their horrible friends are coming and they've insisted on inviting loads of horrible people from my set at the Attainment Centre even though I hate them all and they'll play their horrible music and take loads of tabbacaseed and alco with their horrible friends and it'll all be just . . . just . . .'

14 ' . . . totally unpleasant,' he said.

'Yes. Will you come?'

'Of course.'

'Thank you.'

Quickly, she sprang onto tiptoe and brushed a butterfly kiss onto his cheek. In the instant that her face touched his, he became aware that his cheek was still wet with the last of his tears. It was the first time in all the years they'd known each other she'd ever done anything like this and he watched, puzzled, as she ran off down the street. Taking some of his tears with her, he supposed.

His heart was thudding. He huffed out a sigh and turned towards the intersection at the top of the Orphanage road. There was a rough patch of ground at the bottom of the Orphanage playing field, near the river, and it was here that

Papa Louis had asked to meet him after Attainment Centre this afternoon. They'd often met there when they wanted to talk because the only audiocam in that area had broken and the Officiate had so far failed to notice this. No, there was nothing unusual in Papa Louis's suggestion to meet, not in the suggestion itself. But still Fella was afraid.

Slowly, he approached the concrete Guard hut that overlooked the intersection. A tram had just unloaded a group of giggling girls. Good. This meant that the Guards would have something more entertaining to do than ask him his name.

He hung back as the arrival of the girls, some of them not much older than him, brought the Guards out of the hot darkness of the hut. These girls didn't seem to mind the men leering at them. They met the crude remarks with shrill laughter. One of them produced her ID card from her bra, jiggling her generous breasts in their too-tight top right under the men's eyes. The girls reckoned they knew where the power lay, thought Fella, but they were wrong.

He was almost clear of the hut when the familiar jeer came.

'Oi! Noper boy!'

It was what all the Orphanage kids had to live with. To be branded a Noper, the lowest of the low people, 'no-hopers'. You just had to find a way of showing that the insult didn't touch you.

Fella turned to smile at the Guard. It was one of the older ones. Clearly there weren't enough girls to go round.

'Name!' bellowed the Guard.

Fella passed this way every day on his way back from the Attainment Centre. The Guards knew his name very well but he gave it again, trying to steady his rage.

'Fella who?'

Now the first Guard had attracted a couple of others who, with some of the girls, were staring at him.

'Just Fella,' he said.

'What kind of name is that?'

'My name.'

He waited while they all amused themselves with this. Sometimes it was his hair that displeased them. Boys were not supposed to have long hair. Worse than this, if you were Orphanage scum, boy or girl, you were supposed to have your head shaved. But Papa Louis's head shaver never seemed to be working properly. Five years ago, when Fella was ten, some women had been sent in to shave all the kids in the Orphanage. It was the first time in his life that Fella had felt like killing someone. Although not the last.

'Got a lot of hair for a Noper,' said the first Guard. 'Least he's got plenty of *something*.'

The others laughed again, with less enthusiasm this time. They were more interested in the girls, and Fella saw that his tormentor had lost his audience.

'Get lost, you hairy Noper,' said the Guard. 'But be good. We're watching you.'